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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research prospectus on using uncertainty reduction theory in intercultural communication. After a comprehensive review of the literature on uncertainty reduction, it is found that although information exchange is an important process in uncertainty reduction, it has long been neglected in previous studies. In the paper, after a critique of previous studies, new assumptions are generated which formulate a new framework of information exchange in uncertainty reduction. It is maintained that the framework is intended as an alternative way to study uncertainty reduction in intercultural communication, and various hypotheses are generated to test the framework. Possible research topics which are based on this new framework are also suggested. One figure is included; 46 references are attached. (PRA)

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Information Exchange: The Core Concept of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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Running Head: INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION

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Abstract

This paper presents a research prospectus of using uncertainty reduction theory in intercultural communication. After a comprehensive review of literature on uncertainty reduction, the author finds that although information exchange is an important process in uncertainty reduction, it has long been neglected in previous studies. Benefited from the findings of previous studies, a new framework of information exchange in uncertainty reduction is formulated. Hypotheses are generated to test this framework. Possible research topics which are based on this new framework are also suggested in this paper.

Information Exchange: The Core Concept of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty reduction theory(URT) is one of the most developed theories in the fledgling discipline of communication. Since the first discussion of URT by C. R. Berger and R. J. Calabrese in 1975, their seven axioms and twenty-one theorems which constitute the framework of the theory have been repeatedly tested by communication scholars. Challenges and questions to the URT began in 1986 when Sunnafrank(1986) advanced his Predicted Outcome Value(POV) theory as a competing theory of URT. The theoretical accuracy of the original theory has also been questioned(Kellermann, 1986; Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). Taken as a positive diagnosis for interpersonal communication(Berger, 1986), those studies have not only added new content to the theory, but also clarified its boundary conditions. Even more, by these studies, URT has also been proved to be applicable in other communication situations such as intercultural communication(e.g. studies by Gudykunst, 1983, 1985: Gudykunst et al., 1984, 1986, 1987, 1989.) small group communication (e.g. Gudykunst, 1988, etc.) and organizational communication(e.g. Lester, 1986; Miller et al., 1990, etc.). Although literature on URT is huge and diversified, it is generally systematically organized, centering on the testing and questioning of axioms and theorems of the original theory and the application of URT to communication contexts other than initial interpersonal interactions. This paper focuses on the information exchanging aspect of the original URT theory, develops a general model based upon the concept of

information exchange, and applies it into intercultural communication practice.

PART I: AN INFORMATION CONCERNED THEORY:

NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF URT

The first discussion of uncertainty in communication was given by Berger and Calabrese(1975). Their article in Human Communication Research titled "Some explanations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication" signified the formulation of URT. Before the publication of this article, although some sociologists, psychologists and communication researchers realized the role of uncertainty in human affairs and human communication, their discussions of uncertainty were virtually ignored by most communication scholars. No theories were built and no empirical studies were conducted on this topic. In order to remedy this situation, Berger and Calabrese advanced an axiomatic theory which has employed uncertainty as the central construct to explain and predict communication phenomena. After fifteen years of evolution, URT has now become one of the most fruitful and promising theories in communication research.

Uncertainty and Its Nature

Uncertainty

As proposed by Berger and Calabrese(1975), their theory of uncertainty primarily focused on the initial phase of interaction between strangers. When strangers in their initial interaction meet, "their primary concern is one of

uncertainty reduction and increasing predictability about the behavior of themselves and others in the interaction"(Berger and Calabrese, 1975, p.100). Uncertainty and its reduction are critical to the ability of individuals to conduct such initial encounters. Berger(1975) indicated that uncertainty may occur for at least two reasons. First, high uncertainty occurs when the number of alternative ways of believing and behaving is relatively high; second, the need to make accurate predictions and the inability to do so produces uncertainty. In order to conduct a coordinated communication episode that has any meaning, people must be able to reduce their mutual uncertainties about each other's past, current, and future actions so that they can select from their individual repertoires those responses that will enable them to keep the interaction episode going on (Berger, 1986). This process of uncertainty reduction includes two interactive processes: Proactive attribution and retroactive attribution.

Proactive attribution is the process which formulates or defines behavior options in the face of the wide variety of possible responses available to interacting individuals (Clatterbuck, 1979). In the beginning of a particular interaction, interactants may find a number of alternative actions from which they may choose one to behave. The uncertainty is high at this point. Therefore, one task for each interactant is to try to predict the most likely alternative action the partner might take. Moreover, the individual interactant must select from his own available response alternatives the action that are most appropriate to the

predicted action of the other.

Retroactive attribution is the process which interprets the meaning of past actions in the relationship and provides the information base upon which future interaction will be based(Clatterbuck, 1979). In almost all situations, there are a number of possible alternative attributions one might make for a particular communication act. Individual interactants must decide from these alternatives, which one is the most plausible explanation for the other's behavior in a particular situation.

These two processes reflect two main tasks of uncertainty reduction: Prediction and explanation. First,reduction of uncertainty is realized through communication. URT indicates that communication behavior itself is something which we endeavor to predict and explain. Second, communication behavior is one vehicle through which such predictions and explanations are formulated. According to Berger(1986), uncertainty reduction, in the broad sense, is a vital concern for the conduct of almost any communicative transactions.

Information-Centered Nature of URT

The idea that uncertainty is a function of the number of alternatives present in a situation and their relative likelihood of occurrence is taken primarily and directly from information theory(Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Berger and Calabrese's (1975) URT in initial interaction hypothesized that, in order to reduce their acute uncertainty, initial interaction engage in high levels of information-

seeking(Douglas, 1990). Based upon this hypothesis, initial interaction can be modeled as an information exchange process(Chang, 1982; Kellermann, 1985) with components of information seeking and information provision(Berger & Kellermann, 1983; Chang, 1982; Douglas, 1983,1984; Kellermann & Berger, 1984). "The core of the conversational dyad consists of the mutual transfer of information between partners ... ... Information is the universal element of all conversational contacts and it constitutes the only substantive base for face to face conversation"(Allen & Guy, 1974, pp. 27-28, 251). In initial encounters, information seeking is imperative; it is an activity that characterizes the behaviors and goals of social actors meeting with others for the first time (Kellermann, 1986). Consequently, information provision occurs to meet information-seeking attempts. Berger(1979) indicated that through making proactive and retroactive attributions, the initial uncertainty about conversational pattern decreases. In sum, what is implied in Berger and Calabrese's URT is the thesis that information exchange is the elementary process in communication. Only by seeking and acquiring information of interaction partners can the conversation continue and the relationship develop.

Framework of URT

The original version of URT(Berger & Calabrese, 1975), proposed seven axioms concerning an early stage relationship between uncertainty level and seven variables: amount of verbal communication, non-verbal affiliative expressiveness,

information seeking, intimacy level of communication content, reciprocity rate, similarity and liking. A series of 21 theorems positing relationships between these seven variables through uncertainty was deduced from the seven axioms. Examining the seven axioms, it is easy to find out that the first five variables have actually tapped five aspects of the same construct of information: the amount of information exchanged, the other form of information(non-verbal), information-seeking behavior, quality of information and rules of information exchange. Obviously, in the whole framework of URT, information has played a very important role.

Development of URT

In the first ten years after the primary publication of the original version of URT, this theory received a modest amount of attention. Most studies conducted during this period focused on the testing of theorems proposed in the original theory. Additional routes to uncertainty reduction are proposed as a complement to the original URT. Questions were not raised and competing theories were not proposed until the mid-1980's with the presentation of Sunnafrank's(1986) predicted-outcome-value theory(POV). As observed by Berger(1986), scientific theories are constructed to be modified or discarded rather than accepted as dogma. With the help of those complementary theories and challenges from competing perspectives, URT has developed more rapidly in the past few years and established itself a position more and more vital in communication studies.

Overall, these development can be reviewed along two axes: A vertical axis which indicates the development of URT itself, and a horizontal axis which reflects the application of URT to different communication contexts.

Vertical Review

On the basis of the primary study of uncertainty, alternative explanations to uncertainty reduction are proposed (Berger, 1987). Studies suggested that knowledge of information about persons in the form of person prototypes (Cantor & Mischel, 1977), role schemes, and typical event sequences or scripts(Abelson, 1981; Schank & Abelson, 1977), are crucial if a relationship is to develop. Based upon this consideration, attention was directed toward the acquisition of information, from which cognitive knowledge can be derived about persons.

Three strategies of acquiring this knowledge are presented(Berger, 1979;Berger and Bradac, 1982; Berger et al. 1976): Passive strategy refers to gathering information about a target through unobtrusive observation: Active strategy involves the observation of target's responses to manipulation of the interaction, but no direct interaction. It also includes the acquisition of information about a target through third-part sources; Interactive strategy involves direct, face-to-face contact between the information seeker and the target.

Language is considered as vehicle for information. Berger and Bradac(1982, p.51) contend that language plays a "multifaceted role" in uncertainty reduction

and interpersonal interaction. They argue that "performed language 'gives off' information which is used by 'naive scientists' in the process of uncertainty reduction"(p.57). Sherblom and Rheenen(1984) conduct a study to investigate two propositions of URT and examined their effects on language use. The results of the study are consistent with the propositions of uncertainty reduction. They find that uncertainty is relatively high at the beginning of an interaction and is reduced during the entry phase. Language use changes consistently across communications with reduction of uncertainty. Language indeed plays a "multifaceted role" in interpersonal interactions.

Strategies to "get to know' each other in initial interaction were studied by Douglas(1990). As a direct strategy to acquire information about partner, question-asking is presumed to be especially common. However, because norms of social appropriateness restrict both the rate (Berger et al., 1976) and the intimacy(Berger, 1979; Gardner, 1976) of information requests, initial interactants are posited to invoke less direct strategies as well such as routinely self-disclosure by which to acquire information about each other(Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982). Thus, Douglas(1990) revise the axiomatic relationship between uncertainty and information seeking posited by original URT so as to conjoin attributional confidence and question-asking/disclosure.Analysis of the study results yield broad support for URT. Interactants' global uncertainty decay across conversation segments and is associated with decreased use of question-

asking. The findings of this study contribute to URT in the way that information-seeking and information-provision are distinguished as two processes. Douglas suggests that the transition from question-asking to disclosure signals a shift from seeker-driven uncertainty reduction(information-seeking) to donor-driven uncertainty reduction(information provision). The study also suggests during initial interaction, disclosure is more probably based on actors' ability to predict partners' future conversation behavior than on their overall attributional confidence. This implies the more general argument that (1) initial interactants can be uncertain about one social feature but comparatively certain about others, and (2) the consequences of uncertainty vary as a function of what persons are uncertain about.

Kellermann(1986) further examines information in initial interactions across varying expectations for future contact with the conversational partner. H She identifies thirteen dimensions of information to track conversational content over time, tap individuals' desires, and obtain overall impressions of the information exchange. The study results are not consistent with Berger's(1975, 1979) argument that anticipation of future interaction increases cognitive uncertainty about conversational partners, and the uncertainty is subsequently reduced by acquiring information about their partners for purpose of making proactive and retroactive attributions. The study shows that the anticipation of future interaction has minimal effects on the actuality of and desire for

information exchange. The importance of anticipation for future interaction to URT is questioned by the findings in terms of the relationship of its operationalization to its conceptualization. In one of the later studies, Kellermann and Reynolds(1990) try to set up different models defining motivation to reducing uncertainty in a different way. Tests of these models in terms of their ability to predict information-seeking and attraction reveal that none of these models provides a consistent integration of motivation to reducing uncertainty into URT framework. Based upon these findings, Kellermann and Reynolds come to the conclusion that the level of uncertainty fails to be a cause of information-seeking. URT might be benefited by removing Axiom 3, which specifies a positive relationship between uncertainty and information seeking, from its structure. This conclusion is quite contradictory with other study findings.

As another aim of theory development, some scholars focus their attention on extending URT to account for the growth and decline of relationships. One attempt was made by Parks and Adelman(1983). They apply the URT to the development of romantic relationship. Their study has not only proved the major role that URT plays in theories of relationship development, but also included shared social network as an important variable that is closely related to uncertainty reduction. This variable has been widely employed in later studies.

The other attempt was made by Sunnafrank(1986). He defines uncertainty reduction as the process serving individuals' outcome-maximization goals. He

conceptualizes this theory Predicted-Outcome-Value theory(POV), and regards it as a competing perspective of URT. The theory assumes that the primary determinant of relational growth is the degree to which relationships further individuals' outcome-maximization goals. Predictions of outcome values in the relational future are posited as the principal means of pursuing these goals in early acquaintance. Such predictions allow individuals to determine which relationships may be most rewarding to foster, and how to communicate in order to increase outcome values. From this perspective, the primary reason for information seeking is outcome maximization. Based upon this assumption, he conducted a research to test several contrasting predictions from uncertainty reduction and predicted outcome value theories(Sunnafrank,1990). These competing propositions are the predictions regarding the associations of uncertainty level to amount of communication, non-verbal affiliative expressiveness, information seeking, intimacy level of communication content, and liking. Research findings were interpreted as strongly supporting the POV perspective and its claim that uncertainty reduction processes are subservient to outcome maximization goals in initial interactions. Berger(1986) argued that as POV views information seeking as occupying a central position in outcome-maximization processes(Sunnafrank, 1986), POV can be revised as: uncertainty reduction is viewed as occupying a central position in outcome-maximization processes. Besides, uncertainty reduction is an ongoing activity within

relationships which are in a constant state of flux. As a relationship develops, uncertainty may undermine previously predicted outcome values and force persons to seek further information about their partners to reduce their new uncertainties. Berger (1986) claimed that in general, "URT views POV as a subset of a much larger set of predictions that are vital to the production of coordinated interactions"(p.37). Although most scholars such as Douglas(1990), Kellermann(1986, 1990), would rather regard POV as a revised version of URT, predicted outcome value has still posed the biggest challenge to URT in the past few years.

Horizontal Review

URT has not only been employed to explain initial interaction events, but also been used as a key to studying intercultural interactions and organizational phenomena. There is a common concern for uncertainty reduction by communication scholars. Berger(1986) attributed this concern to the important role uncertainty reduction plays in social processes so that social systems can adapt and survive in the face of change. In communication contexts such as organizational and intercultural situations where uncertainty is particularly high in the early stage of interaction, application of URT seems to be more heuristic and helpful.

Organizational Studies

URT theory has been used to study aspects of organizational socialization(Lester, 1986). Besides, Miller, Ellis, Zook, and Lyles(1990) developed

an integrated model of communication which combines social information processing theory and uncertainty reduction theory to explain organizational stress, and then, to examine their impacts on organizational burnout, job satisfaction and occupational commitment. In organizational situations, the desire to reduce uncertainty and exercise control is the driving mechanism behind the power of social support in reducing the experience of work stress caused by the experience of the unknown. "The significance of supportive communication that reduces one's perception of uncertainty is that it helps the receiver in developing a sense of perceived control over stressful circumstances" (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987, p.24). Consistent with these conceptual statements, Miller et al.(1990) found that participation in the decision-making process is particularly crucial in reducing role stress and increasing perceptions of satisfaction and personal accomplishment. This study suggested that supportive messages can aid in development of theories of how uncertainty is reduced in the work environment and can provide organizational practitioners with specific interventions that could reduce the experience of burnout.

Intercultural Studies

URT is assumed to be especially useful in intercultural encounters when persons from different cultures interact with high uncertainty. The application of URT in intercultural communication has experienced three stages: In the first stage, URT was one of the major theories used to explain interpersonal

communication in the United States(e.g. Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Bradac, 1982); Then, Gudykunst, Yang and Nishida(1985) found that the theory could be extended to explore interpersonal communication in other cultures(i.e. Japan and Korea); Finally, Gudykunst, Kim and Hammer suggested that uncertainty reduction was useful in explaining cultural differences in communication and could be extended to explain intercultural communication. The problems existing in intercultural communication come from both conceptual and methodological domains. Conceptually speaking, those variables and strategies which were generated from intracultural communication situations may vary across cultures. The effects of cultural variability on the variables of the original theory should be considered, and those new culture-concerned variables should be incorporated to fit intercultural studies. Methodologically, measures of uncertainty reduction designed to assess this construct in the United States(e.g., Clatterbuck's, 1979, CL7 measure) may not be generalizable to other-cultural or intercultural studies. They may not adequately reflect uncertainty reduction process in the culture where research has been conducted. Measures which can be used to study uncertainty reduction across cultures by examining patterns of communication in other cultures using only concepts from that culture is required.

In setting up a conceptual framework for intercultural studies, Hall and Hofstede's cultural theories are especially preferred by intercultural researchers. According to Hall(1976), all cultures can be ranked on a continuum ranging from

extremely high-context to extremely low-context. High -context culture refers to one in which little coded, explicit message contains a large amount of information. Low-context culture is just the opposite. No culture exists at the either end of the continuum. Generally, U. S. culture is considered toward the low-context end of the scale, slightly above the German, Swiss and Scandinavian cultures. On the other hand, most Asian cultures fall into the category of high-context culture. Another schema was developed by Hofstede(1980, 1983). He isolated four dimensions of culture: Power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity. Except for the power distance variable, the other three are often employed to operationalize cultural variability in order to examine their influence on perceptions of communication behavior associated with relationship terms.

In order to develop a measure that is generalizable to cultural and intercultural studies, Gudykunst and Nishida(1986) reviewed uncertainty reduction in high-context cultures and generated items to tap attributional confidence in these cultures. They directed their attention on aspects of uncertainty considered important in high-context cultures. Social behaviors and types of information that are considered as important sources of uncertainty were especially discussed in their study. Items of the new measure were mainly derived from these two constructs. Analyzing data from previous studies supported the existence of an eight-item, two factor scale of attributional confidence. This measure incorporates sources of uncertainty from direct forms of communication that

predominate in low-context, individualistic cultures, such as the United Sates, and sources of uncertainty from indirect forms of communication that predominate in high-context collectivistic cultures like Japan. This derived etic measure of attributional confidence can be used in cross-cultural comparison of uncertainty reduction, as well as future intracultural tests of the theory.

Based on the above-mentioned conceptual and methodological preparation, a large number of studies are conducted in intercultural communication using URT. Gudykunst et al.'s studies are especially notable. Gudykunst and his associates have systematically examined several aspects of URT, including the associations specified in the original axioms (Sunnafrank,1989). Their studies used subjects from various cultures or ethnic groups and asked participants to think of a real or imagined communication relationship/encounter with an individual from their own culture or another culture. Demographic characteristics of participants and the stage of participants' relationship are specified. Participants are then asked to continue thinking of this individual while completing a questionnaire concerning their relationship to assess cross-cultural variability on the measures of interest, responses of different cultural or ethnic groups are examined and compared. In studies focusing on the influence of cultural similarity, responses to intracultural relations are compared to those obtained from intercultural relations. Major methodological differences between Gudykunst's studies involve variations in the cultural groups and types of personal relationships examined, and

in the measure taken.

Gudykunst(1983) compared two aspects of initial interaction in low- and high-context cultures. He found that people in high-context cultures are more cautious in initial interactions and have a greater tendency to make assumptions based upon a stranger's cultural background than do people in low-context cultures. Gudykunst and Nishida(1984) studied the individual and cultural influences on uncertainty reduction through comparing Japanese and American subjects. The study indicated that variables such as attitude similarity, cultural similarity, culture, and self-monitoring influenced individual's intent to interrogate, to self-disclose, to display non-verbal affiliative expressiveness, attraction, and attributional confidence. These findings supported Hall's(1976) high-low context culture distinction as well as identifying boundary conditions for URT. Similar to this study, Gudykunst(1985) examined the scope of URT of initial interaction in developed relationships. This study found that cultural similarity, type of relationship, self-monitoring influence self-disclosure, interrogation, deception detection, attraction, attitude similarity, length of relationship, shared communication networks and attributional confidence. In their study of Japanese-American and Caucasians in Hawaii(1987), Gudykunst, Sodetani and Sonoda found that ethnicity, stage of relationship, and ethnolinguistic identity influence the uncertainty reduction process. This result suggested that portions of URT are generalizable to interethnic encounters. Gudykunst, Nishida and

Schmidt(1989) further included in their study cultural variables like individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-feminity. Results suggested that these variables did influence uncertainty reduction in ingroup and outgroup relationships. Gudykunst(1988) employed URT in studying intergroup communication as well. This study also examined the relationships between reduction of uncertainty and intergroup adaptation and effectiveness. In 1990, Gao and Gudykunst conducted a research to combine uncertainty, anxiety, and adaptation together. Based on Gudykunst and Hammer's(1988) communication based theory of intercultural adaptation, Gao and Gudykunst(1990) presented a preliminary test of the two assumptions of the theory. Analyzing data showed preliminary evidence that supports Gudykunst and Hammer's assumption that the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety are necessary and sufficient conditions for intercultural adaptation.

Other aspects of URT in intercultural communication have also been tapped by communication researchers. They found out that not only intercultural interactions in which participants are from different countries may be rendered effortful by uncertainty, but also interethnic interactions within one's own country. Simard(1981) pointed out in her study of Canadian Francophones and Anglophones that both groups "perceive it as more difficult to know how to initiate a conversation, to know what to talk about during the interaction, to be interested in the other person, and to guess in what language they should

talk"(p.179). In sum, the potential stress engendered by uncertainty in intercultural situations is worthy of more attention and study in future research.

PART II: AN INFORMATION-FOCUSED FRAMEWORK OF URT IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

After reviewing previous intercultural studies, it is not difficult to find certain commonalities across all studies. First, as represented by scholars like Gudykunst and Nishida, most studies focus on enumerating, identifying and examining variables from different dimensions that influence the uncertainty reduction process in intercultural communication. Second, most studies have relied upon persons' recollections of past encounters and thus leave some doubt about actual communication behavior(Douglas, 1990). These two commonalities also imply several potential problems of those intercultural studies: First, variables that influence uncertainty reduction might change across situations. Some variables may function in a particular situation while other variables may not. Furthermore, in a certain process such as uncertainty reduction, innumerable factors may function to influence this process. No matter how comprehensive and rigorous those studies are, they can never exhaust the possibility of generating new variables. A more generalizable, comprehensive and flexible framework of uncertainty reduction to study intercultural phenomena is needed. Second, those interaction-based studies have examined conditions designed to affect strangers incentive to engage in uncertainty reduction (e.g., Douglas, 1987; Kellermann,

1986) rather than uncertainty and uncertainty reduction itself. So the new framework should be more directly focus on uncertainty and uncertainty reduction, to explicitly delineate how uncertainty influences communication and how uncertainty is reduced through communication. Finally, information itself is a core concept in URT. Unfortunately, in most intercultural studies, information has been neglected or inadequately measured. The overall framework of URT for intercultural communication to be developed need to take the construct of information as the center of the concern. Therefore, the establishment of a more flexible and comprehensive framework for intercultural communication studies using URT seems to be necessary and useful.

Assumptions

From previous intra- and inter-cultural studies in uncertainty reduction field, several important assumptions have been derived.

Information exchange is crucial to uncertainty reduction. Lack of information about interacting partners is the main reason for cognitive uncertainty. This assumption is directly derived from previous research findings(Douglas, 1990; Kellermann, 1986). Berger and Calabrese's(1975) axiom 3 of the original URT which states the relationship between information seeking and uncertainty reduction also serves as a theoretical basis for this assumption.

Uncertainty is high in initial interaction. As communication goes on, more information being exchanged, uncertainty will decrease gradually. This assumption

is consistent with Douglas'(1990) finding that uncertainty decays across interaction segments and Sherblom and Rheenen's(1984) finding that uncertainty is relatively high at the beginning of an interaction and is reduced during the entry phase.

There is a baseline for uncertainty. Beger and Calabrese(1975) defined it as the upper limit of uncertainty that an individual can tolerate. It is also the minimum information that is required for communication to continue.

Besides information, cultural variability, personal attributes, relationship characteristics, and situational factors will also influence the uncertainty reduction process. This assumption is based upon the large number of studies Gudykunst and his colleagues conducted in intercultural situations (Gudykunst, 1983; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984; Gudykunst, 1985; Gudykunst et al. 1987). The variables that are found to connect closely with uncertainty reduction such as high-and low-context culture, culture similarity, attitude similarity, cognitive complexity, dyadic composition, stage of relationship, type of relationship are summarized in this assumption under three dimensions(culture, personality, and relationship) and considered to be extraneous variables that will influence the uncertainty reduction process in intercultural encounters.

Intercultural Uncertainty Reduction Framework

These assumptions are the conceptual basis for the new intercultural uncertainty reduction framework that aims to remedy those problems of the

previous study and meet the requirements of intercultural studies. A new framework that focuses on the information aspect of uncertainty reduction is thus formulated.

Insert Figure 1 about here

This framework addresses that the information exchange in the communication is the crucial factor that affects uncertainty reduction. It functions throughout the whole process of uncertainty reduction. As more information is exchanged in the communication process, uncertainty decreases accordingly. Other variables, such as personality variables, cultural variables and situational variables also co-function with information variable and interact with one another to influence the uncertainty reduction process. These three dimensional variables--cultural variables, personality variables, and situational variables--may not affect the process of uncertainty reduction equally, however, each of them will more or less either facilitate or impede the process in all different situations. In addition, this framework also suggests the boundary condition of URT, that is, the uncertainty reduction process can only occur above the baseline for uncertainty reduction, which is the upper limit of uncertainty that an individual can tolerate (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). Above the baseline, the more information exchanged, the less uncertainty the interactants will

experience; below that baseline, the communication can hardly proceed, let alone uncertainty reduction.

Test of the Framework

The proposed framework for uncertainty reduction in intercultural communication is actually based on those assumptions generated from previous studies. Some of them have already been empirically tested. What the author has done here is to summarize those empirically supported assumptions into a new framework and generate new hypotheses. Because all these new hypotheses can be either quantitatively or qualitatively tested, the framework itself is thus testable.

Simply, the framework can be tested by testing the following hypotheses generated from the framework:

H1: In the communication processes, the more information exchanged in interaction, the less uncertainty the interactants will be.

H2: There is a baseline for uncertainty reduction. Uncertainty reduction can only occur above the baseline, no communication can proceed under the baseline (This is a fairly qualitative hypothesis).

H3: Different cultures have different baselines for uncertainty.

H4: The closer the two baselines of two different cultures, the more easily the two interactants from different cultures to communicate with each other; the farther away the two baselines, the more difficult it is for interactants from

different cultures to communicate.

This framework can be also tested by applying it to explain uncertainty reduction phenomena in different communication situations. In the process of testing this framework, future studies are suggested.

Future studies

All the above-mentioned newly generated hypotheses can be possible research topics in the future. Besides, in applying this framework into other communication situations, we can not only test the generalizability of this framework, but also extend and enrich the content of uncertainty Reduction Theory. For example, in applying this framework into computer-mediated communication(CMC), we may explore new areas in URT and develop it to explain those phenomena encountered in CMC. Most probably, the proposed framework in this paper can serve as a bridge to connect URT to CMC.

Conclusion

This paper provides an overall review of literature on URT. After reviewing and criticizing the previous studies on URT, the author generates several assumptions based upon previous research findings. All these assumptions are then summarized into a new framework of URT in intercultural communication. Information exchange, which has long been neglected, is now the main component of this framework. The author expects to use this framework as an alternative way to study uncertainty reduction in intercultural communication. Hypotheses are generated from this framework and possible research topics are put forward at the end of this paper.

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Figure 1: Framework of uncertainty reduction theory in intercultural situation.